

# RASTA MEK A TROD. SYMBOLIC AMBIGUITY IN A GLOBALIZING RELIGION<sup>1</sup>

Carole D. Yawney (Toronto)

Rastafari in these times represents a remarkable picture, not only for Caribbeanists, but also for students of New Age religion. Although it has its roots in an island culture on the capitalist periphery, and although it has always appealed expressly to Africans of the Diaspora, Rastafari nevertheless has acquired the status of a global religion over the last two decades. ("Global" is used here rather than "universal", in order to stress the movement's distribution in space more than the transcendent appeal of its creed.) To some extent the dissemination of Rastafari can be explained sociologically by the fact that Jamaicans themselves have had to go into diaspora, whether for political or economic reasons, and some of them accordingly have carried the World/Sound/Power of Rastafari abroad – to Africa itself, but also to the Americas, to Britain, northern Europe, Japan, New Zealand, and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

Yet to cram Rastafari's global spread into the baggage of emigration is to ignore the fact that Jamaicans – not to mention Rastafari – are socially enclaved if not outrightly persecuted in most of the nations where they have settled. How then can they exert any real cultural influence in these places? The alternative explanation treats Rastafari mainly as a media phenomenon, borne along on a wave of enthusiasm for reggae as it is heard worldwide in broadcasts, recordings, and live concerts. But here again, in this explanation there is a lack of appreciation for the depth of commitment to Rastafari outside of Jamaica, for this clearly exceeds the aesthetic dimension alone.

In this paper we will seek to go beyond both positions by approaching the vision of Rastafari as a constellation of ambiguous symbols, which today has the power to focalize and even mediate certain socio-cultural tensions that have developed on a global scale. Theoretically this is an important line of investigation, for it promises to shed light on the ways in which sacred imagery passes across an ethnic boundary. But it is also worthwhile to reason along these lines if only to neutralize ethnocentrism, for there is a pronounced tendency among those not in the spirit of Rasta-

---

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Douglas W. Smith for advice and suggestions in the preparation of this paper.

fari to ridicule its sacred imagery as reactionary, anachronistic, or merely eccentric.

More than present-day, text-centred Christianity, Rastafari puts great emphasis upon the practice of contemplation, which employs visual imagery as a focus for concentrated thought. Orthodox Rastafari contemplation draws upon a small lexicon of "master symbols" which allude to a realm that is pure, righteous and potent. In Rastafari sacred art these symbols are assembled with typical iconographic rigor, so that their spiritual and/or historical message might be "read" without risk of heresy or confusion.

Foremost among these master symbols are images stemming from the political dynasty of Ethiopia, as this was portrayed in the press of the 1930's. Time and again in the yards of West Kingston we see represented the austere visage of Emperor Haile Selassie I; or profiles of the Emperor's power totem, the Lion of Judah; or trinitarian figures, including the Star of David, which derive from the Emperor's throne name, "Power of the Trinity"; or pictures of the Empress Menon in the company of her husband; or epigraphs in Amharic script, an official language of Ethiopia; or reproductions of the Ethiopian flag, sometimes rippled and sometimes flattened. And everywhere prominent use is made of red, gold, and green – the colour symbolism which bands the Ethiopian flag. Apart from these specifically Ethiopian motifs there are four other master symbols which have a more general African origin, these being dreadlocks, the herbs chalice, the standing drums, and finally, the continent of Africa itself.

Nowadays, however, Rastafari iconography employs a number of what may be called "adjunct symbols", whose sacredness is not beyond dispute. Most of these elements originate in the Jamaican experience; thus palm trees and outline maps of Jamaica appear frequently, as do images of Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley. Still, we must recognize that the leading edge of Rastafari has not yet been rendered in visual imagery. Around such matters as Ital livity, Nyahbinghi culture, African liberation struggles, and converging New Age spiritual traditions some consensus may already have emerged, but there is no final agreement as to how they should be visualized symbolically.

Those Rastafari Elders and craftspeople who make use of visual imagery have the opportunity to work in any of three iconographic genres, which vary according to the complexity and lability of their symbolism. In the observer's own terms these may be characterized as the *devotional*, the *didactic*, and the *mystical* genres, though within Rastafari itself such distinctions are not made.

Of these three genres the simplest and most orthodox is the devotional one, since this often consists only of a single master symbol accompanied by an empowering slogan. Intended as a guide for contemplation,

but sometimes also as a call to action, the Rastafari devotional icon has been reproduced in a wide range of media, including postcards, framed photographs, tabloid covers, and lapel buttons. Since its message is unambiguous, the devotional genre does not inspire commentary, nor does it need decoding.

More complex and idiosyncratic is the didactic genre, which combines both sacred and secular elements in order to represent the suffering of black people in a whiteruled world. Ranging from ephemeral cartoon to paintings in oil, works in this genre may portray in simultaneous tableaux a number of historical characters who may actually have lived at very different points in time. Such works beg commentary for this reason, and in fact they may become meaningful only through the narration of the artist himself, who in this case teaches with the aid of iconic images rather than abstract symbols. Partisans of Rastafari who have not yet reasoned in the Elders' yards are apt to be unfamiliar with didactic art, for this is a genre that does not travel well, except in those rare instances when the Elders themselves accompany their works abroad.

But the most complex and labile of all Rastafari works are those of a mystical cast. These can range from pencilled sketches to technically sophisticated album jackets. In this genre the artist seeks to provide visual keys to ineffable states of mind, which by nature are beyond verbal commentary. He does this by arraying sacred symbols in such a way that these unfold or mutually reinforce one another along ordained visual pathways. The mystical art of Rastafari most clearly reflects the movement's global connections, since it welcomes evocative imagery from other traditions, then goes on to organize this by means of a cosmopolitan "syntax".

When cast in the mystical mode, Rastafari imagery is furthermore liable to lose its oppositional character as reflecting the struggles of black people solely. Here there is a tendency for it to become "universal" and not merely "global".

This is possible in the first place, because certain master symbols by themselves can be interpreted ambiguously. The features of the Emperor, for example, do not conform to black stereotypes, while Ethiopian culture can be regarded as either Coptic or pagan. Again, one may choose to emphasize Ethiopia's theocratic hierarchicalism, or the simple egalitarianism of its dread warriors and ascetic monks. There is also room for ambiguity over the contention that Amharic is the Pure Language, for this may be understood either as the rightful language of pre-slavery Africa, or as an esoteric script with universal relevance. Finally, there is an ambiguous element about the Emperor's historical mission, for on the one hand until 1935 he led the only free state in Africa, yet on the other hand he fulfilled the immigrant's secret wish-dream by prophesying the Europeans' doom on their own home ground at the League of Nations.

Ambiguity is also generated when certain master symbols are juxtaposed with other adjunct ones. Currently this possibility has arisen over the matter of the canonization of Marcus Garvey, which in iconographic terms involves placing the Jamaican leader visually on par with the Ethiopian Emperor. In ways that are richly suggestive, Garvey represents a type that is the polar opposite of Selassie I. In contrast to the austerity, the lean physique and the personal isolation of the Emperor, Garvey is typically portrayed as genial, ample in girth, and charismatic.

An ambiguous mix of adjunct and master symbols is also created by the common practice of printing outline maps of Jamaica with the Ethiopian colours superimposed. To some this may suggest that the island has become saturated with the vision of continental repatriation, but to others it may imply, in Garvey's phrase, that a continent has been exchanged for an island.

Overall, the range of symbolic ambiguities in Rastafari imagery encourages oppressed people everywhere to articulate and resolve their grievances with redemptive imagery. Although this falls short of a political solution, it assists in bringing about a consensual community. This in itself is empowering. Why such symbolic resolutions can be achieved on a global scale has to do with the kinds of common issues faced by people of all nations: the ecological crisis stands over against Ital livity; the corruption of secular leaders is counterposed by the theme of theocratic morality; engulfing materialism is challenged by the vision of pre-industrial Ethiopia; and disenchanted youth are awakened by the words of the Elder.

However, by becoming virtually a global ocurrency, the Rastafari vision has been threatened with dispersion and trivialization. In response, a number of Jamaican Theocratic Elders are counselling a return to orthodoxy. Through their efforts a new symbolic complex has come before the public, both in Jamaica and abroad.<sup>2</sup> Known as Nyahbinghi, which

---

<sup>2</sup>In 1984 a group of three Jamaican Nyahbinghi Elders travelled outside the Caribbean for the first time on a four week cultural-educational mission to Toronto. This programme, known as "Voice of Thunder: Dialogue With Nyahbinghi Elders", was co-organized by the author and Sister Charmaine Montague. It involved at least a dozen public events in different venues. In 1986 this same group of brethren as well as the author participated in a two week long international Rastafari conference in London, England, called "Rastafari Focus". In the weeks following this conference these Nyahbinghi brethren visited different scenes in the U.K. to promote their culture. In the follow-up to this conference a group of local Rastafari initiated in the U.K. a series of reasoning and cultural activities known as "The Nyahbinghi Project". Finally, in 1988 a group of a dozen Nyahbinghi Elders from Jamaica, including for the first time three Sistren, spent several weeks chanting Nyahbinghi from Washington to New York City. This programme was called: "The Rainbow Circle Throne Room of Jah

has roots in the 1930's in Jamaica, this complex is embedded in a ritual process consisting of extended drumming, chanting, reasoning, and testimony, all of which are meant to release spiritual energies that will vanquish Babylon. Nyahbinghi is adamantly opposed to reggae runnins and the dance hall style, and at the very least it is ambivalent about the universalizing trends in the works of Bob Marley. Rather than simply disseminating a symbolism divorced from everyday life, the Nyahbinghi Elders insist on teaching the actual practice of Rastafari, since this alone can generate true understanding and foster inspiration. As an effort at countermissionization, Nyahbinghi is currently striving to rectify a visionary impulse that is imperiled by its very triumphs.

Nyahbinghi, however, cannot be marketed like reggae, for if reggae is essentially a musical phenomenon sometimes with a political message, Nyahbinghi is a cultural performance (and not a media event) consisting of a complex integration of chanting praises, drumming, reasoning, proper conduct, dancing, clothing, symbolism, and devotional discourse. Springing from a primarily oral culture, Nyahbinghi Rastafari are not comfortable with the radical separation of artist and audience. When binghis are convened in Jamaica it is assumed that all are participants, that all are in a state of devotional awareness, that all will strive to observe certain ritual injunctions.

It is customary in Jamaica to establish a Nyahbinghi compound, one that is clearly separated from the ordinary world, by the fact that it is in isolated rural parts, with a main entrance monitored by self-appointed gate keepers who take it upon themselves to reason with strangers as to their purpose in being there. The central focus of Nyahbinghi activity is the Tabernacle, a roofed-over open-air structure, usually containing an Altar, around which participants dance and chant praises, and near which a large fire is maintained for the duration of the celebration. By the fact that both food and fuel are generally provided by those convening the Assembly there is no need for the participants to leave before the end of the event, which could last several days. Binghis differ from the rural folk festival by the fact that there are no ordained performers upon whom audience attention is focussed. While it is true that between women and men there is an assignment of background and foreground roles, it cannot be said that there is a distinction between performer and audience. Antiphonal chanting, interactive reasoning, collective dancing, and communal cuisine all serve to forestall this polarity. Brethren phase one another in playing the drums, and can exercise their virtuoso talents only within strictly ordained rhythmic parameters. And last but

---

Rastafari: The Musical and Oral Traditions of the Nyahbinghi Order". At the same time several Nyahbinghi Elders travelled to California on a similar mission.

not least, their sounds go unamplified in these places where there is no electricity.

Now, when Nyahbinghi Elders decide to make a *trod* beyond the Caribbean they are faced with all the contradictions implicit in moving from an oral to an electronic context. This results in another set of symbolic ambiguities which may stimulate further cultural creativity on the part of Rastafari.

Outside Jamaica Nyahbinghi Elders find their movements restricted. Unlike reggae stars they need a special social and cultural milieu to be authentically themselves. Travelling always as a group, as Brethren, they insist that the standards of *ital livity* be upheld wherever they take lodging. This means that they expect to be sustained by a community of Rastafari. Obviously such communities must attain a certain critical density before they can perform this service for the Nyahbinghi Elders. And what this means in practical terms is that Nyahbinghi pathways are restricted to those countries where there is a substantial host community. Currently this means Canada, United States, and Britain, but in the near future may well include Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and Ethiopia.

In the second place, even though Nyahbinghi Elders nowadays can rest assured that their *livity* will be upheld in a few countries beyond the Caribbean, they nevertheless face substantial contradictions when it comes to celebrating Nyahbinghi in such places.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the difficulties of sponsorship and the responsibility of the Elders to those who have organized the venues, neither they nor their hosts feel comfortable in rural circumstances where the majority of the population is white. First World Nyahbinghis therefore are staged, not held, in auditoria. This not only limits the length of the occasion but it also makes available amplification devices which enhance the sounds of the performers at the expense of the rest of the gathering. With a stage at their disposal the drummers assume an unnatural prominence over the Rastafari arranged in tiers of chairs before them. Sensible fire regulations prohibit *ital* cooking in charcoal braziers and invariably disallow firepits which in Jamaica are a non-personal focus of ecstatic energy. And it goes without saying that the chalice cannot be in view, that instead of being a public sacrament it becomes a secret. In all these respects the full expression of Nyahbinghi is hobbled in the First World.

On the other hand there is a much broader exposure to Nyahbinghi than would ever be possible in Jamaica. Apart from local Nyahbinghi Rastafari in attendance, who may even be in the minority, there will doubtless be

---

<sup>3</sup>It must be remembered that here we are referring to public Nyahbinghi activities organized in the context of a "tour". For years Rastafari in the Diaspora have held Nyahbinghi celebrations in the United States or Britain privately.

Rastafari who have never visited Jamaica, Third World sympathizers of Rastafari, and whites who may be politicized or who may simply be there for the music. Here then is a symbolically potent situation where a pure but parochial culture is radiated onto an audience sure to provide a mixed response.

Still, in this dialectic between stern parochialism and jaded post-modernism there is none of the hysteria or hilarity that one might suppose. Even though this polarity of performer and audience is largely maintained, one discerns in these gatherings a kind of quizzicality. Far from ridiculing the performance the audience typically makes hesitant, even timid attempts to bridge the gulf (and are encouraged to do so) between their emptiness and the performer's fullness. There is a poignancy in this, an instability, for we can see beneath the post-modern addiction to pastiche and self-reference a profound yearning for a simpler way. Having been alerted to the abuses of dogma the audience holds itself back with exemplary finesse, but they suffer at the same time from a paralysis of cynicism. And you can see their hearts warm to a level of the performance that is deeper than dogma. In these first few encounters between Nyahbinghi and nihilism can we see emerging a new way of being together where orthodoxy is simultaneously bracketed and revered?

If such an attitude is emerging it is certainly not rooted primarily in nostalgia. There can be no sepia-tone sentiment where Nyahbinghi is concerned for in their reasoning the Elders channel pure Word/Sound/Power. Perhaps what we harken to in these gatherings is the possibility of experiencing *communitas* and rectitude in a situation of symbolic ambiguity: while we feel no commitment to the symbols as such, it is nevertheless this very provincialism that provides us privileged access to the Cosmic. Rastafari have chosen to speak in the metaphors of the Judaic heritage, the deepest tradition they could trace, given the disruption of slavery. And this radical simplification of things – call it fundamentalism – awakens us. It brings us to our senses. We see the world from the point of view of eternal verities. This is healing work, even though it uses symbols for which we feel only the echo of allegiance.

Let us return to the basic dualism that links together the hierarchical and the egalitarian, the theocratic and the anarchic, the vertical and the horizontal, Elder and youth. Underlying these, what is the basic contradiction that when unreconciled creates a rich panoply of symbolic ambiguities? To keep the faith with Rastafari we would have to pay only nodding attention to all these no doubt profound Western perplexities and then assert in their place the view that the innermost or fundamental contradiction involves Africa in relation to the Diaspora. Cast anew from the Garden which was a paradise not because everything was fulfilled, but because all was possible, Rastafari articulates the dignified sadness

of passionate exile to the point where it evokes such primordial imagery and sentiments that it becomes one with the mind and ways of all exiles, including ourselves.